“The desire to transcend civilization seems itself to be a product of class society; the rosy view of pre-history is itself a creation of history.”

In this pamphlet:

“Civilization and its latest discontents”
from Aufheben #4 (1995)

prole.info

CIVILIZATION AND ITS LATEST DISCONTENTS

Civilization and its latest discontents

Review Article: Fredy Perlman (1983).
"Against His-story, Against Leviathan!" Detroit: Black & Red.

from Aufheben #4 (1995)

> *"I'm born in a certain age which has certain instruments of production and certain kinds of knowledge; I have the possibility to combine my ability with my knowledge, and can use the socially available means of production as instruments with which to realize an individual or collective project."*
>
> (R. Gregoire & F. Perlman, 1969) [1]

Civilization is under attack. A new critical current has emerged in recent years, united by an antagonism towards all tendencies that seem to include 'progress' as part of their programme. Perlman's book, described in the AK Distribution 1993 Catalogue as 'One of the most significant and influential anarchic texts of the last few decades' (p. 30), is one of the key texts in this 'primitivist' current. In the U.S.A. and this country, it is in anarchist circles - particularly amongst those engaged in eco-struggles - that primitivism has become particularly popular. But Perlman used to be a Marxist (see the quote above), and he contributed usefully to the development of a libertarian version of Marx's theory for a number of years. The wholesale abandonment of Marx in favour of primitivism has touched the non-Leninist revolutionary milieu in this country too, with the recent conversion of Wildcat[2] to the anti-civilization position.

One direction that the primitivist current points in is the need to develop a critique of technology. This is something the old left cannot grasp, and is one of the reasons why it is unable to connect properly with tendencies toward communism. According to most varieties of leftism, technological progress and therefore economic growth will be of universal benefit so long as they are planned rationally; what prevents the full and rational development of the forces of production is the irrationality of the capitalist market. All this is reflected in the way leftists relate to the new struggles over technological 'progress', such as the anti-roads movement. Thus, while opportunists like the SWP treat these new struggles as valid only because they might be fertile grounds for recruitment to the 'real' struggle, leftists who are more openly traditional on this issue - such as the RCP - repeat the old claim that what the proles really want is more and better roads (so we can all get to work on time, perhaps!): a modern infrastructure is necessary for growth, and an expanding economy necessarily makes for a better quality of life.

The old project of simply taking over existing means of production was the creation of an era before capital had so thoroughly invested its own

subjectivity in technology, design and the labour process. The technology that promises to liberate us in fact enslaves us by regulating our activities in and through work and leisure; machines and factories pollute our environments and destroy our bodies; their products offer us the image of real life instead of its substance. Now, more than ever, it is often more appropriate to smash existing means of production than merely manage them differently. We must therefore go beyond leftist notions of the neutrality of technology and problematize their definitions of progress.

The current anti-roads movement offers an example of a practical critique of progress - that is, one which contests dominant definitions of progress through physically disrupting their implementation. As we argued in our lastissue, struggles such as that over the M11 link road in north-east London should be understood as part of the class struggle. This is often despite the ideas of those taking part, some of which echo Perlman's ideological critique of progress. In contrast to the practical critique, the ideological critique actively hinders an adequate critique of capitalism. Thus Perlman rejects unwanted leftist notions only through a retreat into a form of romantic quasi-anarchism which is unable to grasp the movement necessary to abolish capital. Given that Perlman is only one voice, however, the present article will use a review of his book as a springboard for a critique of other expressions of the new primitivist current.

The case against 'progress'

Perlman's book begins by distinguishing between a state of nature (harmony between humanity and the rest of nature) and civilization. Civilization began, not because everyone wanted to improve their conditions of existence, not because of 'material conditions', but because a small group of people imposed it on everyone else. Perlman traces the origin of civilization to the Sumerians, who, he says, felt obliged to build waterworks to ensure a regular supply of water. The Sumerians invested power to direct the building of the waterworks in one individual, who eventually became a powerful expert elite and then a warrior elite - the first ruling class, in effect. Under the direction of their ruling class, the Sumerians then waged war on their neighbours, eventually enslaving them. The rest of Perlman's book is taken up with the rest of world history, comprising the evolution of - and resistance to - various types of Leviathan (the name, taken from Hobbes, which Perlman uses for civilization, class society or the state), each of which takes in human beings as its living energy, is animated by them, and excretes them out as it decays, only to be replaced by yet another Leviathan. Leviathans fight with each other, but the winner is always Leviathan. Given that the opposition is between Leviathan and the oppressed majority, the differences between types of class society can therefore be largely glossed over.

Perlman appears to agree with Marx that what distinguishes

civilization from primitive communism is the development of the means of production, which enabled surplus labour and thus the existence of a parasitic non-productive class. But the book challenges the traditional Marxist view by suggesting that in primitive communism there were already 'surpluses'.[3] If there was no problem with means of subsistence, then there could be no need to develop the means of production. The emergence of civilization is therefore comparable with the 'fall' from the Garden of Eden.

However, Perlman's claim that the ancient Sumerians felt obliged to introduce technological innovation suggests that primitive communism wasn't always so idyllic after all: the place where they were living was 'hellish'; they were intent on 'farming a jungle'; in the rainy season the floods carried off both their crops and their houses, while in the dry season their plants dried up and died.[4] This might suggest that population growth forced people to live in marginal lands, away from any surpluses. It also seems to conflict with Perlman's repeated claim that material conditions were not responsible for the development of technology and thus civilization; if lack of a regular water supply isn't a material condition, then what is? Similarly, the material condition of a growing population isn't discussed.[5] The social relations Perlman describes which accompany the new technology seem to be rather arbitrary. Much (the whole of history, in fact) seems to hinge on the decision made by the 'wise' (sic) Sumerian elders to appoint 'a strong young man' to be the 'supervisor' of the waterworks project. (So is chance to blame rather than the small minority?)

The writings of John Zerzan, such as his collection of essays Elements of Refusal,[6] seems to take Perlman's general argument further (back). Zerzan's writings are not orthodoxy within the new primitivist current, but they have been important in the American primitivist and eco-anarchist scenes in setting agendas for debate on issues such as agriculture. The whole problem in Zerzan's view may be summarized as follows: symbolization set in motion the series of horrors that is civilization's trajectory. Symbolization led to ideas of time, number, art and language which in turn led to agriculture. Religion gets the blame as well, being carried by language, and being one of the prime culprits for agriculture: food production is 'at base ... a religious activity' (p. 70). But why is agriculture so bad? According to Zerzan, 'captivity itself and every form of enslavement has agriculture as its progenitor or model' (p. 75). Therefore while Perlman might have wanted to defend existing primitive communities against encroaching capitalist development, Zerzan sees anyone using agriculture as already alienated and therefore not worth saving: even most tribal types wouldn't be pure enough for him. Similarly, permaculture is an aspiration of many primitivists, but, within Zerzan's vision, this too would be part of the problem since it is a method of production. His later work[7] has even dismissed hunter-gathering - since hunting leads to symbolism (and all the rest).

It might be easy to dismiss many of Perlman's and Zerzan's

The Society of the Spectacle. (London: Practical Paradise Publications), A. Negri (1984), Marx beyond Marx, (New York: Autonomedia) and F.C. Shortall (1994), The Incomplete Marx, (Aldershot: Avebury). It is true that the question of ecology which concerns primitivists remains neglected even in these relatively recent developments. Again, however, it is only by understanding the historical context of this neglect in Marx and others that we might develop revolutionary theory instead of merely counterposing it to an ecological approach.

(29) The primitivist George Bradford suggests that the only way that capital and the mega-machine will be destroyed is through the weight of their own complexity - in other words through an objective process of decline. A mere critique of 'progress' is an inadequate critique of objectivism (and hence an inadequate grasp of the subjective) and so reproduces further objectivism.

(30) See 'Decadence' article in this issue and Aufheben 2 and 3.

arguments as just half-baked idealism. They are not particularly original, and indeed might be said to be no more than vulgarizations of the ideas of Camatte (see below); if we are interested in theory, it might therefore be more appropriate to develop a critique of his work rather than theirs. However, Camatte is far less well known and far less influential than either Perlman or Zerzan. The fact that their ideas are becoming something of a material force - in the form of an increasing number of people engaged in struggle espousing primitivism - means that we have to take them seriously in their own right.

The modern context of primitivism

Ideas of a golden age and a rejection of civilization are nothing new. The Romantic Movement in bourgeois philosophy began with Rousseau, who eulogized unmediated relations with 'nature' and characterized 'industry' as evil. (Perlman quotes Rousseau approvingly.) But why has this old idea become so popular now?

It would seem no coincidence that anti-civilization ideas have blossomed in particular in the U.S.A. It is easy to see how such ideas can take hold in a place where there is still a recognizable wilderness which is currently being destroyed by production. The U.S.A. differs from Europe also in the fact that it lacks the long history of struggle that characterizes the transition from feudalism to capitalism (and the making of the proletariat). Instead, it has had the wholesale imposition of capitalism on indigenous cultures - a real genocide. Moreover, in recent years, the U.S.A. has also differed from Europe in the extent of the defeat of proletarian struggle over there.

Defeat brings pessimism, and when the current radical movement is on the decline, it may be easier to be radical about the past than to be radical in a practical way in the present.[8] In the biography of Perlman, we can trace a movement from hope in the proletariat as the liberatory force to a turn to nature and the past in the context of defeat. As a Marxist, Perlman was caught up in the events of 1968, where he discovered the texts and ideas of the Situationist International, anarchism and the Spanish Revolution, and council communism. Afterwards, however, on moving to the U.S.A., '[t]he shrinking arena for meaningful political activity in the early 70s led Fredy to see himself as less of an "activist" and more as a rememberer.'[9] Perlman's development is closely linked with that of Jacques Camatte, sometime comrade of the Italian left-communist Bordiga. Camatte broke with left-communist organizations partly due to his recognition of the need to go beyond their (objectivist) perspective and rethink Marx on the basis of the radical promise offered by such texts as the 'Results of the Immediate Process of Production' (The 'missing sixth chapter' of Capital Volume I), the Grundrisse, and the 1844 Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts. However, Camatte eventually concluded that capital was in fact all powerful;

given this, the proletariat offered no hope and the only option for humanity was to run away and escape somehow.

In the case of Zerzan, his early work romanticizes proletarian spontaneity; on the basis of his observations of apparently new expressions of resistance in the form of worker sabotage and absenteeism, he pronounced this to be the future of class struggle.[10] In the early 1980s, the recession threw millions out of work. We might take this as the vindication of his critics' predictions about the transience of these forms of the revolt against work as viable expressions of the class struggle; for in the face of widespread unemployment how could workers commit sabotage or go absent? But instead of recognizing the setbacks to the struggle as a whole, Zerzan saw in the new unemployment figures the 'collapse' of capitalism and the 'vitality' of the revolt against work. For those who were still in jobs, work intensity increased during this period. To Zerzan, however, the most important thing, was a decline of the work-ethic. Zerzan also dismissed strikes (successful or otherwise) as being cathartic charades. His focus on attitudes allowed the perilous state of the proletariat as a movement to be overlooked.

Zerzan's unrealistic optimism is merely the flipside of the pessimism that comes with defeat.[11] But holding on to such ideas - substituting the simple negation of civilization for the determinate negation of capitalism - is not only a reflection of pessimism with current movements; it also functions to prevent adherents from connecting with these movements. The ultimate test of the primitivists' case might be its usefulness in struggles. Primitivists say they don't want to 'simply' go back (maybe they want to go back in a more 'complex' way - in a tardis, perhaps), but neither do they say much about what we should be doing now; and Perlman and Zerzan give few examples of collective struggles that seem to them to point in the right direction.[12] In the past, Perlman and Zerzan made contributions to revolutionary struggle; but whatever useful contributions Zerzan may make now do not particularly seem to flow from his theory.

For the modern primitivist, the despair of failing to locate the future in the present, and of failing to counteract the pervasiveness of production, may leave no alternative but principled suicide (possibly in the service of a bombing mission against one or other manifestation of the 'mega-machine'), or resignation before Leviathan's irresistible progress, and a search for an individual solution. Although primitivists see capital as a social relation, they seem to have lost the sense that it is a process of class struggle, not just an imposition by a powerful oppressor. Since, in their account, all praxis is alienated, how can proletarian praxis possibly offer the way out? So, for example, George Bradford, writing in Fifth Estate,[13] argues that all we can hope to do is maintain human decency, affirm moral coherence and defend 'human personhood', and hope that others do the same.

(15) Freud argued that the essence of civilization was the sublimation of (socially unacceptable) pre-existing drives. In seeing an opposition between civilization and the full and unadulterated expression of human desires, Perlman and Zerzan agree with Freud; the only difference is that Freud thought much of civilization was good. (S. Freud (1930). Civilization and its discontents. In A. Dickson (Ed., 1985). Pelican Freud Library 12. Harmondsworth: Penguin.)

(16) I.I. Rubin (1972). Essays on Marx's Theory of Value. (Trans. M. Samardzija & F. Perlman). Detroit: Black & Red. (First published 1928).

(17) Marx, Theses on Feuerbach, in C. Arthur (Ed., 1974). The German Ideology (Student Edition). London: Lawrence & Wishart.

(18) An example of the drive to expand civilization and the productive forces being located in the psychology of individuals rather than in the totality of social relations comes in Against His-story when Perlman attributes the conquest of primitives by Europeans to the latter's 'resentment' of those who seem to be free (p. 267).

(19) See the debate in The Refusal of Work.

(20) L. Perlman op. cit.

(21) The moral undertone in the critique of civilization resonates with the puritanically moral conceptions of human needs held by many eco-anarchist types, who tell their comrades that the latter 'don't really need' some of the things they desire, and who attempt to specify to them 'all the things we really need' - usually a spartan list reflecting historically-contingent notions of 'biological necessities'.

(22) Descriptions based on Perry Anderson (1974), Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism, (London: NLB).

(23) Wildcat 17, p. 11.

(24) 'The practical Marx' (1979) in Elements of Refusal. The style seems typical of Zerzan whose articles are frequently made up of a collection of quotes and empirical snippets with little analysis.

(25) Wildcat 17, p. 24.

(26) Ibid. pp. 9-10.

(27) The irony of Zerzan's pseudo-critique is that he could find legitimate reason for making a valid criticism of Marx simply by opening Volume I of Capital where the Luddites are dismissed as 'reactionary'. Marx contradicts himself in the 'missing sixth chapter' of the same volume ('Results of the Immediate Process of Production') by characterizing technology not as a neutral object but as the very agent of the worker's alienation and therefore a proper target of rational class hatred.

(28) On this point of developing Marx using Marx's method, see G. Debord (1967).

Notes

(1) Worker-Student Action Committees, p. 85. Detroit: Black & Red.

(2) Wildcat 17, Spring 1994.

(3) The argument is based on M. Sahlins's (1974) Stone Age Economics (London: Tavistock), which suggests that stone age types had 'what they wanted' in abundance.

(4) Against His-story, p. 18.

(5) If 'overpopulation' by human beings is seen as the problem, the solution might be to call for the annihilation of 99.99% of the human race to return the other 0.01% to the state of nature, a rather problematic conclusion for someone who is supposed to be on the side of the human race against Leviathan: for, after all, who will decide who should make up the privileged 0.01%?

(6) J. Zerzan (1988). Elements of Refusal. Seattle: Left Bank Books.

(7) J. Zerzan (1994). Future Primitive and other Essays. New York: Autonomedia.

(8) The historians E.P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm and Christopher Hill are prime examples of people who, because of the separation of past from present, are/were able to pursue a revolutionary historiography within academia alongside a merely reformist political practice.

(9) Lorraine Perlman (1989). Having Little, Being Much. A Chronicle of Fredy Perlman's Fifty Years. Detroit: Black & Red. p. 91.

(10) See The Refusal of Work, Echanges et Mouvement (1979).

(11) Wildcat's position too seems to be tied up with a pessimism that comes from the low point of the struggle: 'it is difficult at present to see how the New World Order of Madonna and MacDonald's [sic] contains its own negation' (Wildcat 17, p. 16). The all-or-nothing approach that is characteristic of varieties of ultra-leftism swings fixedly from unreasonable optimism to despair; when resistance is strong, it seems to make sense to see the proletariat as attempting always to express spontaneous revolutionary tendencies, which are hampered only by leftism and the unions. But when the resistance is defeated, there seems to be nothing left - hence the appeal of a diametrically opposite extreme position.

(12) In the same way, Rousseau was aware that his moral critique of civilization did not point to any practical solution.

(13) 'The Triumph of Capital' (Fifth Estate, Spring 1992).

(14) 'Needs are created by human society, along with the means to satisfy them.' (Wildcat 17, p. 16)

History produces its own questioners

The argument that the turn to primitivism reflects the limits of the class struggle at the present time has certain consequences for the coherence of the primitivist position. To say that primitives necessarily resisted civilization may be to project on to them the primitivist's own desires - specifically, her own antipathy to technology and 'civilized' (i.e. class) society. Primitives very likely were not conscious of their way of life as a possibility or choice in the way the modern primitivist is, and therefore would not have valued it in the same way that we might, and may not necessarily have resisted the development ofthe productive forces. The desire to transcend civilization seems itself to be a product of class society; the rosy view of pre-history is itself a creation of history.

The issue touches upon the definition of 'human nature'. In confronting this, we find two sorts of position in the writings of primitivists. Firstly, consistent with Marx's approach, some acknowledge that human needs and desires are indeed historical products.[14] But, for the logically pure primitivist, this is problematic because such needs and desires would therefore be an effect of the very thing they are trying to overcome; these needs would be part of history and civilization, and therefore alienated. (Recall the traditional leftist view that capitalism holds back our needs for technological progress; to the primitivist, needs like these would be part of the problem.)

Given this, primitivists often imply instead that the human needs and desires to which civilization is antithetical are ahistorical or suprahistorical.[15] Perlman says nothing explicit in his book about the precise features of this ahistorical human nature he seems to be positing, except that he 'take[s] it for granted that resistance is the natural human response to dehumanization' (p. 184). The rest, we can assume, is simply the negative of his account of civilization: non-hierarchical, non-working and so on.

Again, an ahistorical 'human nature' argument against capital ('civilization', 'government' etc.) is not a new one, and we don't have to re-invent the dialectical wheel to argue against it. In fact, we can turn to some of Perlman's own work for a pretty good counter-argument. In his Introduction to Rubin's Essays on Marx's Theory of Value,[16] Perlman discusses Feuerbach's conception of human nature. As Perlman says, for Feuerbach the human essence is something isolated, unhistorical and therefore abstract. The great leap in theory beyond the bourgeois idealists made by Marx was to argue against this that 'the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.' (p. 122).[17]

By contrast, then, the later Perlman makes a huge leap backwards in theory to rediscover old, bourgeois notions which define human nature in terms of certain negative desires located within each individual.[18] Similarly,

Zerzan counterposes 'alienation' (be it through hierarchy, agriculture or wage labour) to an asocial humanity. His more promising early writing on absenteeism and sabotage was flawed by his inability to recognize the limits of struggle that does not become collective.[19] His more recent work centres on a critique of language, that aspect of human life which, probably more than any other, allows us to share and therefore makes us social beings.

Primitivists' conception of the essential ontological opposition as being between history (civilization) and an abstract human nature, instead of between two historically-contingent sets of interests (capital versus the proletariat), means that their critique tends to be merely a moral one. For example, as his widow and biographer states, Perlman argues that the trail-blazers of civilization did have other choices.[20] In Worker-Student Action Committees, a similarly voluntaristic theme works as a useful critique of the limits of the practice of those taking part in the events in Paris in May 1968: 'Subjectively they thought they were revolutionaries because they thought a revolution was taking place ... They were not going to initiate this process; they were going to follow the wave wherever it pushed them.' (p. 82). But, in the absence of a proper recognition of the logical-historical drives and constraints of particular modes of production, Perlman's primitivism represents the degeneration of a non-objectivist version of Marxism into a version of the anarchist critique of power, with all its obvious weaknesses: 'These leaders were just bad or stupid people!' Similarly, in the case of Zerzan, language is said to have arisen not so that people could co-operate with each other, but 'for the purpose of lying' (Elements of Refusal , p. 27). So we must blame, not class interests, but people's moral failings![21]

Whose progress is it anyway?

Primitivists say little about variations and changes in climate in pre-historic times. In certain times and places, there may well have been societies like the idyll described by Perlman; but it is equally likely that other situations were nightmarish. All primitive societies relied completely on the benevolence of nature, something which could easily change; and changes in climatic conditions could wipe out thousands.

Bound up with the primitivist view of pre-history as an ideal state is the rigid distinction they draw between nature and human productive activity. What makes us human are the set of 'first order mediations' between humanity and nature: our needs, the natural world around us, our power to create, and so on. To be human is to be creative. Through 'second order mediations', these basic qualities of existence are themselves mediated by relationships - of power, alienation, exploitation and so on - between classes. Zerzan idealizes a golden age before humanity became distinct from nature only because he conflates human creative activity per se with alienated creative activity; to him, any human creative activity - any activity which affects the rest of nature - is already saturated with exploitation and alienation.

Theory, history and future

In approaches to history, there is an important difference between looking to it for a communist ideal and attempting to understand why previous communist tendencies have failed - and thus why we have more chance than the Luddites, millenarian peasants, classical workers' movement etc. But in order to go beyond these previous tendencies, we also need to interrogate the present and the future. What new developments in technology call forth new unities within the working class? Do changes to the means of communication enable those engaged in struggles to understand and act moreeffectively upon their global significance?

To grasp present trends, we need more than the radical anthropology offered by primitivists. We need theory that allows us to understand the historical specificity of struggles. Capitalism is the most dynamic of class societies; the proletariat is the only revolutionary class that seeks to abolish itself and all classes. There are therefore many features of the present epoch of class struggle that are lost in the simple gloss 'civilization'. In order to struggle effectively, to understand the possible directions of struggles and the limits of particular ideologies within struggles, we need to develop - not reject - the categories Marx derived to grasp the capital relation and the process of its negation.

'Primitivism' is itself a product of a particular period of capitalist history. The same setbacks that have encouraged postmodernism among radicals in the academic realm have helped produce primitivism in circles of activists. One merely describes 'the end of History', the other actively calls for such an end; both are an inverted form of liberal idealism which reject the traditional liberal faith in capitalist progress.

However, if primitivism was, like postmodernism, simply a complacent expression by well-paid academics of the defeat of industrial class struggles then we wouldn't bother giving it space in these pages. All of us are forced to make a response to increased pollution and environmental destruction brought about by the growth of the alien power that is capital; primitivism is, at best, an attempt to engage in struggles around these kind of issues. The alarming and compelling new appearance of the fundamental problematic of alienation, in the form of world-wide environmental destruction for profit, has encouraged new forms of resistance (particularly in the U.S.A.), and these new forms seek ideas. Marxism, identified with the old forms (of both capital and its resistance), is seen to fail in the eyes of this new wave of resisters - hence the appeal of a radical alternative, such as primitivism. But the problem of primitivism lies in a flawed diagnosis of the problem of Marxism: the essential problem in Marx and Marxism is not the belief in progress, but objectivism.[29] A revolutionary theory adequate to the struggle needed at the present time must therefore start with a critique of the objectivism of previous revolutionary theories.[30]

then use as evidence in a critique of (their reading of) Marx's theory. From the Grundrisse, they find a quote to show that Marx thought that capitalist progress and thus alienation was a necessary step to the full development of the individual;[25] and from the Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy they quote Marx's well-known statement declaring that the development of the productive forces is the precondition for communism.[26] These kinds of theoretical statements they link to Marx's failings in practice, in particular his support for the American Civil War. In response, we might pick out a dozen more quotes from different texts by Marx - or even from the same texts Wildcat draw upon - to show the importance he placed on proletarian subjectivity and self-activity; and we might link these with his important and innovatory contributions to revolutionary practice, such as his support for the Silesian uprising and the Paris Commune.

But a mere selection (or even an aggregation) of quotes from Marx is not an analysis. If we think there is anything useful in Marx's work, we could try to locate his limits and contradictions in their historical context rather than in the person of Marx in abstraction.[27] As Debord argued, Marx's limits and contradictionsreflect those of the workers' movement of the time. The economistic element in Marx's theory - exemplified in writings such as Capital - was merely one facet of his project as a whole. When the struggle appeared to be at its most promising, the totality and hence the subjective came to the fore in Marx's theory (as in the case of the overall content and direction of the Grundrisse); but in the face of setbacks Marx was reduced to scientistic justifications. It was also important rhetorically, of course, to foresee the inevitability of the communist revolution in the maturation of capitalism (as in The Communist Manifesto, for example). Understanding Marx this way allows us to critically develop his revolutionary theory in the direction of communism rather than leading us simply to dump it as a whole uncritically.[28]

In an important sense, Marx was simply describing his observation that the development of the forces of production in the end brought communism closer through the proletarianization of the population. It is also true that at times he was an advocate of such development. But the main point is that such advocacy of capitalist progress does not flow from his theoretical premises in the clear cut way the primitivists would have us believe. Productivism is one trajectory from his work; this is the one taken up by the Soviet Marxists and other objectivists in their narrow, scientistic reading. But, taking his project as a whole, Marx's theory also points to the active negation of capital through thoroughgoing class struggle on all fronts.

What the anti-civilization position overlooks, therefore, is the mutual constitution of humanity and (the rest of) nature: humans are part of nature, and it is their nature to humanize nature. Nature and humanity are co-defining parts of a single moving totality; both are therefore subject to change and change each other. Changes in the world may lead to new social relations among human beings - relations which may involve a different relation to that world, a different praxis and technology (such as when the Iron Age developed out of climatic changes). We are products of nature, but we also create ourselves through our own activity in shaping the world that we inhabit. While it is certainly true that to privilege 'humanity' in any of these changes may be to damage the very environment we need to live, to privilege 'the natural world' by viewing all our activity as an assault on it may be to damage humanity.

If the change from pre-history to agriculture and other innovations wasn't necessarily alienating - if the latter weren't by their nature imposed within and through social relations of domination - then the whole historical opposition Perlman and Zerzan set up between progress and its popular resistance is thrown into doubt. Evidence from history suggests that progress is by no means necessarily the expression of the powerful; rather the powerful were sometimes indifferent to progress, and the powerless were sometimes the ones who contributed to it.[22]

In Antiquity, particularly in Greek society, there was technological stagnation rather than progress. The surplus product of slave labour was used for innovations only in the sphere of civic society and the intellectual realm. Manual labour, and therefore innovations in production, were associated in the minds of the Greek ruling class with loss of liberty. Although the Romans introduced more technical developments, these were largely confined to the material improvement of cities (e.g., central heating) and the armed forces (e.g., roads) rather than the forces of production. In both cases, military conquest was preferred to economic advance through the forces of production.

In the feudal period, both lords and peasants had reasons to bring innovations to agriculture to increase production. The growing desires for amenities and luxuries in the aristocratic class as a whole, particularly from about the year 1000 onwards, motivated an expansion of supply from the countryside. Hence the introduction of the water-mill and the spread of viticulture. The peasants were motivated to create and satisfy new needs by the particular parameters of the feudal mode of production, which tied the peasant to only a certain weekly toll and fixed number of days to work: the rest of the time was their own, and could be used to improve their quality of life. Hence more and more villages came to possess forges for local production of iron tools; cereal cultivation spread; and the quality and quantity of production on the peasants' own plots increased.

The key to understanding the massive growth in productivity in the feudal

period, however, was the recurrent rent struggles between peasants and landowners. Disputes over land, initiated by either pole of the feudal relationship, motivated occupation and colonization of new lands in the form of reclamation of heaths, swampland and forests for agricultural purposes. It was a continual class struggle that drove the economy forward.

Primitivism, by suggesting that the initiators of progress are always the ruling class, projects features of capitalism back into the past - as do most bourgeois theories. Previous class societies were based largely on a settled level of technology; in such societies technological change may have been resisted by the ruling classes since it might have upset settled relations of dominance. Capitalism is the only mode of production based on constantly revolutionizing technology and the means of production.

Moreover, characterizing capitalism as simply the rule of technology or the 'mega-machine' fetishizes fixed capital as a prime mover, thereby losing sight of the struggle behind the shape of the means of production. Progress within capitalism is characteristically the result of capital responding to forms of resistance. For example, in the shift to Taylorist production methods, the variables that the management scientists were having to deal with were not merely technical factors but the awkwardness and power of the workforce; this could best be controlled and harnessed as variable capital (so the scientists thought) by physically separating the job of work into its component parts and the workers along the production line so they were unable to fraternize. One of the next steps in improving output was the introduction of the 'human relations' approach, putting a human face on the factory, which was forced upon capital by worker resistance (in the form of absenteeism and sabotage) to the starkness of pure Taylorism.

Thus, we might understand progress in the forces of production not as the absolute imposition of the will of one class over another, but as the result of the class contradiction itself. If progress is in an important sense a compromise, a result of conflict - both between classes and between competing capitals - then some of its effects might be positive. We might hate capitalism, but most of us can think of capitalist technologies we'd like to keep to meet our present and future needs (though not as commodities, of course) - be it mountain bikes, light bulbs or word processors. This is consistent with our immediate experience of modern capitalism, which isn't simply imposed upon us monolithically, but has to reflect our own wishes in some way. After all, isn't the essence of the spectacle the recuperation of the multiplicity of our own desires? Therefore it is not some abstract progress which we want to abolish, but the contradictory progress we get in class society. The process of communism entails the reappropriation and radical, critical transformation of that created within the alienated social relations of capitalism. To hold that the problem is essentially technology itself is a mystification; human instruments are not out of our control within capitalism because they are instruments (any more than our own hands are necessarily out of our control), but because they are the instruments of capital - and

therefore of reified, second-order mediations.

Given all this, the argument by Wildcat[23] - that IF the productive forces need to be developed to a sufficient degree to make communism possible, and IF these forces are not developed sufficiently now, THEN revolutionaries might have to support their further development - applies only to Marxist objectivism rather than to the version of Marx's project we are trying to develop. At any time, the revolutionary supports the opposition to capital (and, by extension, takes the side of any communist tendency in any class society). Actions by the opposition to capital can force concessions from capital, making further successful resistance possible both subjectively (confidence, ideas of possibility etc.) and objectively (pushing capital beyond itself, weakening its mechanisms of control etc.). 'Progress' often describes the deferment of this revolutionary process, as the mode of production is forced to change its form: look at the way the class compromise of the post-war settlement entailed the development of new production and accumulation methods in the form of Fordism. In their attack on progress, Wildcat mistake the shadows for the substance of the fight.

Good and bad Marx

Perlman and Camatte certainly knew their Marx, and developed their early, more promising, revolutionary theory through a confrontation with him. But Against His-story and much of Zerzan's work recommend no such constructive confrontation; rather they encourage a simplistic and dismissive attitude by characterizing Marx as merely a nineteenth century advocate of progress. From that perspective, any apparently radical critique of Marx is welcomed, including that of postmodernist scumbags like Baudrillard. (The Mirror of Production, a book by the media darling and recuperator of situationist ideas, which groups Marx with the rest of the 'modernist' has-beens, is promoted in the primitivist-influenced Fifth Estate periodical.)

A critique of Marx and Marxism is certainly necessary, but primitivism (like postmodernism) is merely the ideologization of such a critique. The anti-civilization position is not just a necessary attack on leftism, but a counter-productive attack on everything in Marx. In defending some version of Marx against primitivism, we certainly need to acknowledge the problems in attempting to separate from some of its own consequences a theory which sought not merely to interpret the world but to change it. However, some of the primitivist critics seem to simply fit Marx up rather than attempt to understand some of the limitations of his theory. For example, Zerzan's critique of Marx claims to link Marx's practice with the supposed problems of this theory. But the critique consists almost entirely of a list of Marx's personal shortcomings and says virtually nothing about his theory.[24]

At least Wildcat bother to dig out some quotes from Marx, which they